

## Stem Cell Agency Awards Almost \$20 million to Companies Developing Therapies for Diabetes and a Potentially Deadly Blood Disorder

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San Francisco, CA – Biotech companies ViaCyte and Bluebird Bio will get almost \$20 million dollars to move promising therapies in diabetes and Beta-thalassemia from the lab and into clinical trials in people. The money comes from the state stem cell agency – the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM) – in the first round of its new Strategic Partnership Awards initiative.

A grant of \$10.1 million was awarded to ViaCyte Inc. to continue preclinical and initiate clinical testing of an embryonic stem cell-based therapy that holds the promise of transforming the way patients with insulin dependent diabetes are treated. In its review of ViaCyte's application, the independent Grants Working Group characterized the proposed therapy as the "holy grail" of diabetes treatments. This therapy has been supported by previous rounds of funding from the stem cell agency, reflecting CIRM's commitment to following promising science at all stages of development.

In addition, the stem cell agency is awarding Bluebird Bio \$9.3 million to use a stem cell and gene therapy approach to correct a genetic disease in young patients with B-thalassemia, an inherited blood disorder that can cause widespread organ damage and premature death.

These are the first awards under the agency's Strategic Partnership Awards initiative, which is designed to engage more effectively with industry and to increase outside investment in CIRM-funded stem cell research.

"Moving a promising stem cell therapy into clinical trials can be very demanding technically and also very expensive," says Alan Trounson, PhD, President of the stem cell agency. "That's why we created this initiative, to make it easier for companies to partner with CIRM in clinical trials and to more effectively enable critical expertise and industry resources to support and help manage product development to achieve widespread availability for patients."

"We are very grateful for the assistance that we are receiving from CIRM to advance our promising technology", stated Paul Laikind, PhD, President and CEO of ViaCyte. "Today's grant allows us to continue our efforts on behalf of the California taxpayers to break new ground with a stem cell-based product that has the potential to essentially cure patients with type 1 diabetes and provide a powerful new treatment for those with type 2 disease."

The funding awards were made at the October 25th meeting of the stem cell agency's governing board, the Independent Citizens Oversight Committee (ICOC).

"These awards are designed to help companies complete early stage clinical trials within four years," says Jonathan Thomas, JD, PhD, Chair of the ICOC. "We feel if we can help companies demonstrate that their therapies are safe, even in small groups of patients, that they will then be able to attract funding from a large biotech or pharmaceutical company to help them complete larger-scale clinical trials and get FDA approval."

The ICOC also approved up to \$40 million for funding for a second round of Strategic Partnership Awards for 2013, and up to \$100 million for the third round of the Disease Team Awards. Both are designed to speed up the pathway for stem cell-based clinical trials in people.

## Strategic Partnership Awards

Application	Institution	Name	Total committed funding
SP1-06513	ViaCyte Inc	Howard Foyt	\$10,075,070
SP1-06477	Bluebird Bio	David Davidson	\$9,363,335
Total			\$19,438,405

**About CIRM:** CIRM was established in November 2004 with the passage of Proposition 71, the California Stem Cell Research and Cures Act. The statewide ballot measure, which provided \$3 billion in funding for stem cell research at California universities and research institutions, was overwhelmingly approved by voters, and called for the establishment of an entity to make grants and provide loans for stem cell research, research facilities, and other vital research opportunities. A list of grants and loans awarded to date may be seen here: <http://www.cirm.ca.gov/for-researchers/researchfunding>.

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